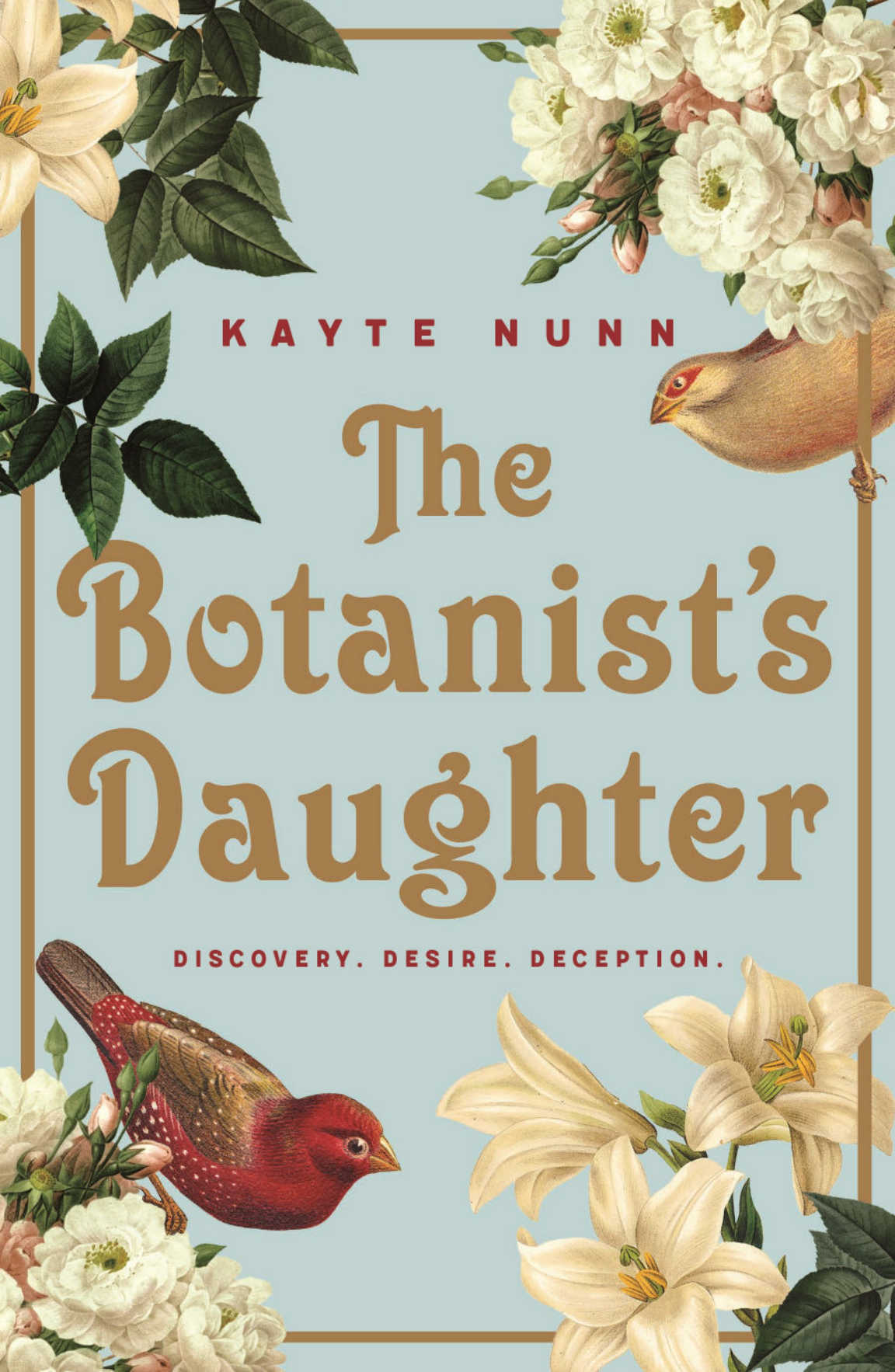
KAYTE NUNN

The Botanist's Daughter

DISCOVERY. DESIRE. DECEPTION.



Also by Kayte Nunn

Rose's Vintage
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For Sheila, who loved lilies and reading

I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers

– *Sonnet XVII*, Pablo Neruda

Chapter One

Sydney, Autumn 2017

Anna opened the door to see three men standing there. The one closest to her was a lumbering, Neanderthal-browed hulk; the next a middling, middle-aged figure in overalls; and just behind him, there was a shorter, thinner, younger one with tattoos running down the sinewy muscles of his forearms.

'The three bears,' she said under her breath, noticing as she did that the paint on the jamb had begun to flake. It was a deep mulberry shade called 'Grand Poobah', the name of which had made her grandmother honk with laughter in the middle of the hardware store. It had been a few months after Anna's granddad died, and Gussie had wanted to cheer herself up.

Shifting her gaze from the men, Anna pressed the tongues of loose paint against the bare wood in a futile attempt to reaffix them.

'What's that you say?' asked the lumbering one, who, with his rough halo of golden hair and a belly that strained the weave of his shirt, reminded her distinctly of Papa Bear. 'Have we got the right place?' He consulted a notebook, running a stubby forefinger down the page, and then looked across at her. 'Jenkins, is it?'

'Sorry,' replied Anna, suddenly flustered at the thought that he might have overheard her. 'Come in.'

She stood back and ushered them through the door, and the men looked around, sizing up the place, their heavy boots echoing in the empty house. Anna held her breath as she led them into the kitchen, a tiny space in the middle of the long, narrow terrace that hadn't seen an update in decades. She gazed at the lemon Formica, the timber cupboards and the orange-and-brown linoleum, its patterned surface worn to a blur by a million steps. She remembered the excitement of coming to stay as a child, being driven across the bridge from her leafy suburban home to what seemed like another world, one of endless, twisting narrow streets and slivers of houses fronted by lacy wrought-iron balconies. Of sitting at the kitchen table eating jam sandwiches washed down with frosted glasses of icy pink Nesquik. Of her granddad taking her and her sister up the street to the corner store, skipping ahead of them over the cracks in the pavement, eager for the Redskins and Violet Crumbles that were stacked on the shop's narrow shelves. In summer there were sweet and sticky Icy Poles or Paddle Pops. A Monaco Bar if they were really lucky.

Sweet memories, all.

Papa Bear spoke. 'All right then, love, we'll go and get our gear and make a start. Shouldn't take us too long,' he said as he led the others away.

They returned a few minutes later, armed with crowbars and hammers, and Anna left them to it, going up the stairs and into her grandparents' old bedroom at the front of the house. The flowered yellow wallpaper was mottled with faded patches where the afternoon sun caught it and the carpet was worn. As she reached the centre of the room she caught a faint whiff of Gussie's perfume – Youth Dew. Applied with a generous hand and worn without a hint of irony. She half-expected Gussie to come bustling out at her, grey hair neatly curled, drying her hands on a towel and scolding her for the lack of warning, a ready smile dimpling her cheeks nonetheless. Granddad had died when Anna was a teen, but it was the loss of Gussie she felt the most.

Of course, in recent years, more often than not when Anna would call round her grandmother would mistake her for her mother, or worse, not recognise her at all. Now, the sombre tick of the clock on the mantel was the only welcome.

Anna ran a finger along the dusty windowsills, then opened the French doors onto the balcony that faced the street, letting in the breeze. The house had been shut up for a few months, and the smell of damp couldn't be ignored; it had been an insufferably humid summer.

Her grandparents had favoured dark, heavy furniture with sturdy turned legs that weighed an absolute ton; the house had been crammed with it, every last bit of wall space taken up with

sideboards and dressers, their surfaces laden with floral china, crocheted doilies, dusty glass ornaments, collectors' dolls dressed in native costume from countries they would never visit. But the clearance firm had been the week before and now the place was emptier than Anna had ever known it, almost all trace of its former occupants erased. Sudden grief overwhelmed her and brought a rush of wet heat behind her eyes.

It's only stuff, she told herself sternly. *None of it will bring Gussie back*. Her grandmother had left this house, the Paddington terrace she'd been born in, raised a family in and died in, solely to Anna. That had been a surprise. Almost as shocking as the fact of her grandmother's death. Despite her fading memory, the old lady had been spry, insisting on living by herself. 'What would I want with a load of old strangers dribbling into their tea and cacking their undies?' she'd asked when Anna's mum had tentatively suggested several times over recent years that she might want to think about moving to a retirement home, especially after her Alzheimer's diagnosis.

Anna felt suddenly overwhelmed. Was she doing the right thing? Should she have waited? Did she have the strength to do this on her own?

Don't be ridiculous, she scolded herself. The decision had been made. She would see this through.

She walked down the stairs, stepping over the one that had always creaked, cast a swift look at the builders, who had begun the demolition of the front room – the 'good room', she remembered with a faint smile – then turned towards the back of the house. She passed through the draughty sleep-out where

she and her sister used to stay when they were kids, and opened the back door.

She let out a long sigh.

She shouldn't have been surprised as she'd not been out the back for months, but she was disheartened nonetheless. The garden, for so long her grandmother's pride and joy, was in a complete state. Overgrown wasn't a strong enough word for it: great choking weeds had sprung up, overwhelming the once carefully tended plantings. Anna, who as a girl had loved to potter about in the postage-stamp-sized space equipped with her own little trowel and fork, helping her grandmother weed and water, had been too concerned with the life ebbing away inside the house to do so much as even peer outside; and then, after Gus's death she hadn't wanted to linger in the house. She spent her days looking after other people's gardens and had left this one untended.

The east fence was an unkempt hedge of murraya, its normally heady-scented bell-shaped flowers dried up and brown. The path had almost disappeared beneath a creeping mat of tradescantia. Ivy curled its strangling tendrils up the crepe myrtle. And the wisteria, trained over the back fence, had collapsed on itself. Under her breath, she recited the names of her grandmother's favourite plants as if they were a litany, searching for each among the tangle of weeds. She murmured their names under her breath as much to reassure herself as anything else . . . brilliant orange strelitzia – birds of paradise – purple aster, a deep magenta bougainvillea, hippeastrum, hellebores, camellia, pelargonium and delicate viola in the shade there . . . the familiar words a salve to her sorrow.

As she cleared a space to sit on the weathered Lutyens bench at the back of the garden, her gaze rested on a spider's web that billowed in the breeze like a parachute, its gossamer threads stretched almost to breaking point. Had it been nearly six months? Half a year already? For all that time she'd been an automaton, roused daily from heavy sleep by her alarm, going through the motions at work, barely remembering conversations with her clients, losing herself in the repetitive digging and weeding of garden beds and the mowing of summer lawns. She had avoided returning to this garden, a place she was once so fond of.

She squinted up at the sun, which had climbed higher in the sky and then across to the apple tree in the corner, last season's wizened fruit still hanging from its branches. Here in this garden was the proof: while some lives ended, the rest of the world marched relentlessly on. Trying to stop it was as futile as attempting to catch water in a web.

She sat, surveying the scene, when from inside the house suddenly came a louder thump than all the preceding ones, followed by a shout. She heard her name called and sprang up, hurrying along the path back to the house.

As she entered the house, clouds of white dust filled the air, and what were once three small rooms on the ground floor was now an open space, bigger than she had imagined it might be. It had all come apart so quickly. The old carpet had been pulled up and rolled up and now lolled halfway out the front door. Bricks and crumbling mortar and plasterboard littered the floor.

'All right, love?' said the tall, lumbering one. 'We thought you might want to see this.' He pointed at the bookshelves,

which the builders had begun to rip away from the far wall. 'Almost a shame to pull them out, really. You don't often see workmanship like that these days.'

'What?' Anna had left clear instructions to demolish the shelves, in order to widen the narrow room, so she wasn't sure what they were showing her.

'Look a bit closer, there,' he said, pointing to the wall that had been covered by the bookshelf furthest from the window. She did as she was asked and then she saw it – a hole at about waist height. As she stepped forward to get a better look, she noticed the smallest of the demolition men standing to her left. 'Here,' he piped up, his voice as reedy as his frame, and as she turned towards him he held out a battered notebook. It was completely grey, covered in dust and fine spider filaments. 'Not sure what this is, but you might like to take a gander at it.'

'Thanks.' She took the notebook and blew on its surface, sending a cloud of ash puffing into the air. She wiped at the book with one finger, revealing a dark blue cover. She opened it carefully and saw dense, spidery writing covering the yellowed pages. 'How odd. I wonder how something like this ended up in the brickwork?'

'Well, what is it?' he asked anxiously.

'I'm not sure. It must have got stuck behind there before the shelves were built. I'll take a better look at it later.'

She returned to the garden and, after placing the notebook on the bench beside her, was pondering where to start work, when there was another crash and a shout for her. *What this time?*

She retraced her steps and leant around the door: this time the middle-sized builder was holding a greyish box, about the size a pair of boots might come in.

'In *there*?' Anna asked, staring at the hole in the wall, which scarcely looked large enough to have contained the box. As if to convince herself, she stepped forward and peered into the space. She shuddered as she looked into the pitch blackness, imagining enormous spiders and the round, hard shells of dead woodlice.

'Take a look,' said the boss, picking up a torch and shining it upwards.

She stared up into the narrow opening: about half a metre up, the chute widened slightly to some kind of shelf.

'Yeah, up there,' he confirmed. 'I was having a bit of a sticky beak. I just about got my arm up there and tipped it over, and down it came. It got stuck, but I managed to wiggle it out.'

Anna turned back to the builder who was holding the box. Taking it from him, she was surprised at its weight and had to tense her biceps to avoid dropping it. It wasn't in fact grey, just covered in dust and cobwebs as the notebook had been. She rubbed her fingers across the top to reveal a tarnished metal surface. The edges of the box had been etched into shapes and as Anna brushed more of the dust away, she discovered three-dimensional bees and curlicues of plants and flowers. Four-leafed clovers were carved at each corner. 'Bloody hell,' she exclaimed. 'How bizarre.'

'If you say so, love,' said the boss, scratching his head. 'Lucky it didn't break Nathan's arm when it came down.'

'Yes, I guess it was,' she replied absently, still absorbed in the box. She put it down on the floor and tried the lid, but it

wouldn't budge. Wiping away the dust from the sides with her hands, she discovered a small heart-shaped padlock keeping it shut tight. It must have once been brass, but it was now as tarnished and black as the rest of the box. 'I wonder what it is?'

'Want us to have a crack at it?' asked the boss, lifting his sledgehammer.

'No!' cried Anna, still bent down looking at it. 'No. I don't want it damaged.'

'I've got a crowbar,' Nathan added.

'I think I'd better take it to a locksmith actually,' she said, hating the primness in her voice. 'But thanks for the offer.'

'Okay, love, whatever you say. We'll crack on, then. I reckon we'll have most of the demolition in here done by the end of the day.'

Anna looked at the flimsy remains of the bookshelves and nodded. 'Okay, thanks.'

She picked up the box again, holding it away from her body to avoid covering herself in more dust as she headed for the stairs. She felt a shiver as a gust of wind blew through the open front door. How on earth had such a thing come to be hidden away in the wall cavity? Even through the grime she could see that it must have once been very beautiful. Probably valuable, certainly antique. What had possessed someone to hide it like that? Could Granny Gus have wedged it up there, hidden it somewhere it would almost certainly never be discovered? Anna reached for her phone. She had to speak to her mother.

Chapter Two

Cornwall, 1886

The boots were newly arrived from London, ordered in happier times. There were twelve tricky buttons, each firmly hooked into the Moroccan leather, and Elizabeth wrestled with them, trying unsuccessfully to pull each boot from her swollen feet. The bootmaker was renowned as one of the county's finest, and the leather the softest money could buy, but after a mere hour's wear they had given her blisters. If she were at the house, Daisy would have been there to help, button hook at the ready, but as it was she had to make do with her own fumbling fingers, wondering whether the correct last had been used.

Several minutes later, her toes were finally free of their wretched encasement and she wiggled them luxuriously, pressing the tender red spots on her heels and assessing the damage.

'Oh Lord save us, who would wear such things if they had the choice?' Elizabeth said aloud.

Not that there was anyone to hear her complaint.

Earlier, she had escaped the torpor brought on by the late-afternoon heat that crept into every corner of the rambling Trebithick Hall. It had rendered its few occupants – with Elizabeth the sole exception – into a state of dozy insensibility. And so she was able to slip unnoticed into the gloom of the stables, where she commanded Banks, the stablemaster, to bring Achilles to her. 'With my father's saddle, if you please,' she said, daring him to contradict her. Now was not the time for a lady's sidesaddle.

Once he had led the black stallion up to the mounting block, she dismissed him. 'I can certainly manage from here.' She didn't want Banks to see her struggle with her dress, nor – heaven forfend – catch sight of her undergarments. Standards of propriety might have temporarily been eased at Trebithick Hall, but she didn't want to make Banks feel more uncomfortable than he doubtless already was. Hitching up the black bombazine of her skirts, she clambered awkwardly astride the sweating horse and kicked him on. She tried not to think about the fact that she had never ridden Achilles before, and certainly wouldn't have been granted permission when her father was alive, never mind to ride him astride. 'Sidesaddle is the only decorous way for ladies to comport themselves,' John Trebithick had always insisted. Though progressive in other ways – he had encouraged Elizabeth and her sister to study Latin and ancient

Greek, for example – he had been immovable on that particular point of decorum.

'Come on, boy, let's go!' she'd cried, wheeling the big horse around the yard and pointing him out of the hall's side gate and towards the bridleway that ran along the eastern boundary of the Trebithick estate. Achilles needed little encouragement and Elizabeth gripped the reins as he bucked at the unfamiliar weight on his back. Much like her, he had been cooped up for months, as her father became too frail to venture outdoors let alone ride his favourite mount. Although Banks had turned the horse out, letting him kick up his heels in the meadow with the rest of the stable the day before, he was still as fresh as new milk.

Achilles exploded into a gallop before she could rein him in and Elizabeth experienced terror and exhilaration in equal measure at the realisation that she had far less control than she had imagined over the solidly muscled beast. He took off like a skyrocket and with about as much accuracy of direction. 'Steady on there, mister! Whoa! Whoa, boy!' she shouted, her words carried away on the breeze, heeded by neither man nor beast. She curled her fingers into the horse's mane and hung on for dear life. Her bonnet flew off, caught by the wind as they sped onwards. She barely registered the bright purple of the corn-cockle weed, the sheaves of wheat gathered into stooks, leaning like drunkards at a wedding, nor the nettles, grown several feet high along the bridleway, her stockings at least offering some protection from their stinging leaves. It was more than a mile before Achilles seemed to hear her pleas, to feel her frantic

sawing of reins on his mouth, and he slowed a fraction, allowing her to catch her breath and summon her scattered wits.

The bridleway led towards a tiny inlet, and, as if scenting the sea, Achilles sped up once more, hurtling towards the cliff edge at such a pace that Elizabeth feared the stallion wouldn't stop in time and they would both tumble onto the rocks below. She hauled on the reins again and squeezed her knees into Achilles' flanks with all her might until the horse came to an abrupt halt with less than a foot of ground to spare. He gave a snort and tossed his head arrogantly, jangling the bit between his teeth as if to say, *Satisfied?*

Grasping the pommel of the saddle with trembling hands, she leant forward and flung her leg over Achilles' rump, as she'd seen men do, and slid to the ground. She stumbled, muddying her skirts, but picked herself up and, seeing a nearby elm, tied the reins to a low-hanging branch. It took longer than it should have done; her hands would not stop trembling, nor her chest heaving from the effort of keeping Achilles under control.

The crystal blue water sparkled invitingly, a million diamonds strewn on its surface, the horizon a blurred navy line in the shimmer of the noonday heat. The Cornish coastline was renowned for its treachery, with shipwrecks a common occurrence, but Elizabeth knew this tiny inlet well. Ladylove Cove, better known as Lady Luck Cove.

She had spent much of her childhood scrambling over its rocks, pausing only to marvel at the tiny, tenacious plants that clung to its cliffside. The way down to the pebbled beach was steep, but stairs had been cut into the rocks – by long-dead

contraband merchants, so the legend had it – and, happily, the going was dry. Recovered somewhat from the ordeal of her ride, she scampered down the rough steps with the grace of a sprite.

Elizabeth didn't stop to think what Georgiana might say if she knew where she was or what she was up to. Her older sister and her husband, Robert, had arrived from Plymouth three weeks before, too late for the end but in time for the tolling of the church bell that announced her dear papa's death – nine times for a man, and then a further fifty-seven for the years of his life. They were likely even now combing Trebithick Hall for bounty, earmarking paintings and furniture for their own ends. Not that Elizabeth cared. The only thing of value to her was her dear papa, and all the tea in China wouldn't bring him back. She stifled a sob. The time for weeping was over.

In the days after her father's death she had restlessly paced the gardens: going up and down the long walk in a daze, uncertain where or what her future might be. She had no patience for needlework or embroidery, and playing the pianoforte was out of the question. She found no solace in drawing, until then her favourite pastime. She was no longer able to help her father in the meticulous cataloguing of plants; an absorbing task that she had relished when he was alive.

After her sister and brother-in-law had arrived, there had followed a fortnight spent mostly in the stifling drawing room reading condolence cards from visitors; some were dear to her but most she was indifferent to, a few she privately detested, and

several she had never met nor heard of. Though Elizabeth was grateful for the company of her sister, who had only returned home on a few occasions since her marriage six years previously, the need to escape, to fill her lungs with salt-laced air and to feel the breeze against her skin, had become almost overwhelming. Which was why, finding herself unexpectedly alone that afternoon, she had made her way to the stables.

For more than a month before her father's death she had been loath to leave the house for long, venturing only briefly to the gardens for herbs to make into a poultice to try to ease his suffering. She had gone back and forth to the kitchen, much to the annoyance of Cook, to supervise the making of calf's-foot jelly in an attempt to persuade her father to eat something nourishing. Once she had taken the carriage to Padstow, to the new pharmacist, clutching the receipt for a nostrum that her great-grandmother had sworn by, and that had cured Georgiana of a bout of illness when she was a child.

The doctor had made his daily call, purging her father with leeches until he lay back on his pillow, face drained of colour, wracked with a terrifying cough, scarlet blood soaking his handkerchief. But it was all to no avail. Papa had consumption, and there was faint hope of recovery.

Elizabeth struggled to reconcile the pale, weak invalid with the father she had known and loved, a man who was as strong as an ox but as gentle as a lamb with her and Georgiana. A man who chased adventure; a collector of plants who travelled the

world and brought back not only exotic and unusual specimens, but also incredible stories of strange lands and peoples. She and her sister would listen, wide-eyed with wonder at his tales of ancient cities and crescent-shaped boats. They would beg him to tell them of the almond-eyed and dark-skinned women, of snake charmers, mystical healers, holy men and thieves. He would tantalise them with stories of riding on majestic elephants in the Himalayas, of Arum lilies that stank like salted fish and of juicy fruits that tasted sweeter than a kiss. And he would tickle them as he told of hissing snakes that rose up as tall as a man and hairy-legged spiders larger than dinner plates. He might have been absent for many months at a time, but when he was home he delighted in his daughters and paid them careful attention, doing his best to make up for their lack of a mother.

Elizabeth had reached the shore, her boots slipping on stones tumbled smooth by strong Atlantic tides, before reaching the surer footing of the fine golden sand that ringed the bay. She was almost certain of being undisturbed on this wild beach; few if any came along the path she had ridden to reach it. Taking a careful look around to be sure she was unseen, she sat upon a branch of driftwood and began to undress, beginning with the new boots. They were not the best choice of footwear for riding, but she had been so anxious to be free of the stifling house that she had given it little thought. She was forced to wrestle with the buttons on her gown as she had with the boots, but after some contortion was able to unfasten the topmost ones

and slip her dress off her shoulders. She loosened the binding laces of her corset, releasing her stays, and was eventually free of its constriction too. She had frequently cast off all but her underclothes as a little girl while on this beach, but never as a young woman, and she felt a powerful thrill at such an illicit and daring pleasure.

Elizabeth cared as much for corsets as she did for convention, but she had little choice in the wearing of them, despite reading in *The Times* of the Rational Dress Society and silently applauding its endeavours in the big cities. 'If only women did not have to be so constricted in their garments!' she had railed to Mam'zelle Violette. 'Be thankful you are not subject to tight-lacing,' her governess had replied, unmoved.

Finally, she was stripped down to her chemise and bloomers, and the salty air whipped through the fine cotton, both cooling and rousing her. She stretched out her arms, noticing as she did the butterfly-shaped mark on her shoulder. *Café au lait*, Mam'zelle Violette had called it. For Elizabeth, it was an ever-present reminder of her mother, who had the exact same mark in the exact same place – she had seen it on the painting of her that hung in the morning room.

She felt dangerously free, as she hadn't since she was a girl rambling the shoreline with her father, searching for seashells and crabs, for tiny translucent school prawns and seaweed blisters to pop. She stood at the edge of the fizzing, hissing sea, feeling it suck back over her toes, beckoning her. She waded into the water as it frothed around her bare ankles like lace. Further out, it was darker, indigo blue and menacing, white caps indicating

a strong offshore wind, but here, in this sheltered cove, on this sweltering summer afternoon, the water was as clear as gin. Elizabeth gasped as the cold reached her knees but she waded in undeterred. As it reached her chest and dragged her chemise down, swirling the fabric about her, the shock of the icy water forced the air from her lungs and froze her legs to a searing numbness. She could no longer feel her sore and swollen toes. With a determined set to her chin, she struck out until her feet lifted off solid ground and floated, suspended in the ocean's chilly embrace.

She lay back in the water, raised her face to the sky and closed her eyes, seeing red from the warm sun behind her eyelids.

For the first time since her father had died, she felt truly alive.

THE BOTANIST'S DAUGHTER

KAYTE NUNN

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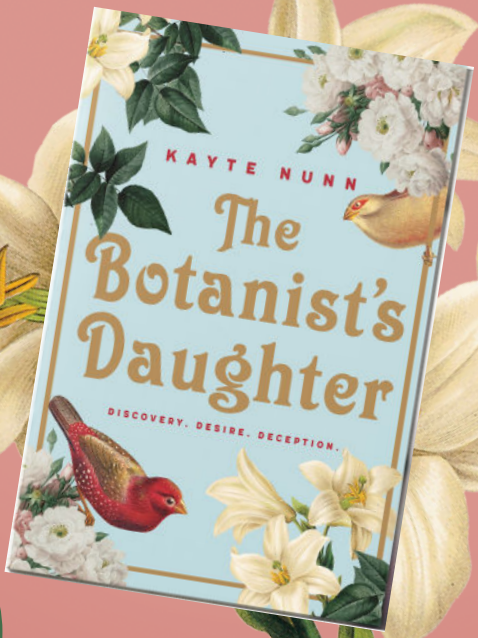

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